

Woodlands resident recalls enlisting at age 14



Norma Bomer, a World War II veteran, holds a copy of the book "America's Youngest Warriors, Volume III." The book includes a profile on Bomer.

By Keith Stelter

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Contributing Writer

In March 1944, a story on the front page of a St. Petersburg, Florida newspaper, blared the following, "Prettiest WAC Born on Ship, Lived in Orient" It had a picture of Norma Bomer, a resident of The Woodlands, holding her WAC (Women's Army Corp.) 'Hobby hat' and listed her age as 24. The article quoted her as saying, "I didn't join the WACs for any particular reason, but because I thought I could help."

That article highlighted Bomer's enlistment. What the reporter did not know, and an even a more interesting story, was that Bomer was only 14 years old. The legal enlistment age for WACs was 21. She still has that article

"That was an interesting story. My Dad died when I was nine and I was living with my grandparents. When I was 14, I went to live with my Mother in Florida. World War II was in full progress and she and I decided I should enlist. The problem was that I was 14. My Mother had traveled extensively and made up a story to tell the recruiter."

Bomer told the recruiter she was born aboard the Japanese ship Tashu Maru in Oriental waters on 12 Jan. 12, 1920 and delivered by the ship's

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— Norma Bomer,

doctor. She also told the recruiter she attended Cook's High School in Honolulu and that her parents were born in Hawaii.

"I told the recruiter that my Mother had difficulty getting a birth certificate for me and that both the American and Japanese consuls were unable to locate evidence of my birth. Amazingly, the recruiter bought my story," she said.

Bomer enlisted in the WACs on March 27, 1944 and was assigned to the 353rd Army Regiment. She completed six weeks of basic training at Fort Oglethorpe, Ga., where she was named "Junior."

"One thing is still with me from basic. We were going through the gas chamber, when the sergeant asked for volunteers to have a drop of mustard gas put on their arm, so the other recruits could see how gas blisters looked. I volunteered and still have a small scar where the mustard gas was applied," she said.

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that lives in Austin and his two children, a daughter who lives right here in Oak Ridge with her three children, and another daughter who lives in Knoxville, Tenn. with her three children," he said.

Lennon's wife Zelma said that being married to such a great man for 63 years has been a wonderful experience.

"I am so proud of all of his accomplishments," she said. "The fact that he is such a kind and considerate man makes all the difference."

Lennon's good friend, Oak Ridge North Police Chief Andy Walters, agreed.

"He is absolutely the greatest guy. He is definitely one of the most delightful men I have ever met. He has done so much for so many," he said. "You won't find a nicer guy. Bill has seen my kids grow up and my daughter always looks forward to seeing him. He is well-liked by a lot of people."

There is no doubt that Lennon has made his community a better place in which to live.

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Next, she went to Hunter Field, Ga.

The day after she arrived, there was a military parade in Savannah. One of the officers led her to a jeep and showed her where to get in the parade.

"I was petrified," Bomer said. "I didn't know how to drive."

The officer put the jeep in first gear and told her not to touch the gear shift, keep her foot near the brake, try not to run over anyone and to wave and smile. Two weeks later she was assigned to drive a general to town. She got to town OK, but couldn't park the staff car. She was immediately sent to a driving class.

While in Georgia performing in a dress parade for WAC Commander Colonel Ovela Culp Hobby she got the opportunity to meet Hobby.

"Texans know of Ovela Hobby. Her husband was mayor of Houston and then Governor. Mrs. Hobby was editor of the Houston Post newspaper for ten years," Bomer said. "I found out she was the first person sworn into the WACs on 5 July 1943, by Secretary of War Stimson. The cop had a strength of over 100,000 by

April 1944. During World War II women

served at military posts and every overseas theater. Their job was to free a man for combat"

The formation of the WAC was heavily debated in Congress. Opposition to the bill centered around southern congressmen. With women in the armed services, one representative asked, "Who will then do the cooking, the washing, the mending, the humble homey tasks to which every woman has devoted herself; who will nurture the children?" His view did not prevail.

Bomer volunteered for overseas duty and was sent to Camp Beale, Calif., to await deployment. She was trained to be an equipment specialist. Her duties were to issue equipment to bomber crews leaving for overseas. World War II ended in August 1945 and in December Bomer was offered choice of receiving an honorable discharge or going to officer candidate's school.

"I chose to leave the military," Bomer said. "I was 15 years old, one month short of being 16."

Several years after she left the service,

Bomer used the GI Bill to enroll in college. She didn't need to tell any stories then, even though she only had an eighth grade education. She went on to earn a bachelor's and master's degree and taught school for 21 years.

Bomer does not consider herself special. She hopes her accomplishments will encourage young people to be optimistic, hopeful and have confidence to pursue their dreams. "America's Youngest Warriors, Volume III," published in 1996, has a chapter on her experiences. This book is the third in a series telling the stories of veterans of underage military service (VUMS).

Bomer lives in The Woodlands, close to her three sons, seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. She is a member of the Veterans of Underage Military Service (VUMS), the Disabled American Veterans, Woodlands American Legion Post 305, Texas State Teachers Associations, the NEA and the Lord of Life Lutheran Church.